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ABSTRACT

This document describes approaches in conducting naturalistic studies in two different countries with contrasting educational settings. Naturalistic research methodology is described by one of the writers as "an explicit undertaking to lay aside our ideas and concern ourselves with finding the subjects' perspectives in their non-theoretical lives." The paper seeks to illustrate the possibility of uncovering common elements in the conduct of naturalistic research. It uses examples from two naturalistic studies, the first located in a small, isolated school in North Queensland, Australia; the other set in a large inner-city school in Vancouver, Canada. The conduct of naturalistic research is influenced by the physical environment, by the community relationships the researcher establishes and by the expectations held for the outcome of the research. Relationships with students, school staff, parents and administrators are detailed. Paper closes with discussion of social characteristics of class structure, their economic parallels, and their possible ties to educational attainment. (Author/TES)

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COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE STUDY OF EDUCATION

IN RURAL AUSTRALIA AND URBAN CANADA

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COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE STUDY OF EDUCATION IN RURAL
AUSTRALIA AND URBAN CANADA

Naturalistic research has been undertaken in a variety of educational settings in the last decade, and most of the reports which followed have been presented as case studies.

The authors have each undertaken naturalistic studies, in different countries and in contrasting educational settings, and found that it is possible to uncover common elements in the conduct of such research. The paper illustrates this using examples from two naturalistic studies, the first located in a small, isolated school in North Queensland, Australia, the other set in a large inner-city school in Vancouver, Canada. Naturalistic research was described in an earlier paper by one of the writers as "an explicit undertaking to lay aside 'our' ideas and concern ourselves with finding the subjects' perspectives in their non-theoretical lives". (Mason, 1973) The way that this is achieved will be influenced by the physical environment, the relations that the researcher is able to establish in the 'field', and even the expectations that all concerned have for the outcomes of the research. This paper draws together naturalistic research by K. J. Stevens in rural Australia and G. A. Mason in an urban Canadian setting.

PART I

BACKGROUND TO EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN RURAL QUEENSLAND

The 1975 School Commission Report drew attention to educational disadvantage in country schools in Australia, yet, significantly, provided scant evidence for such a claim. A major finding of the Commission was that more research was required into this little-known aspect of Australian society. This was subsequently confirmed by the 1977 National Conference on Country Education held in Launceston, and the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, together with several research reports (McGaw et al 1975, Musgrave and Wind 1978, Turney et al 1980).

Little is known, however, about what actually goes on in the day to day life of rural schools. There are few first-hand accounts and almost no detailed research.

It was decided that a "typical" rural Queensland school should be used for the research, and this provided two initial problems. Firstly, so little was known about such schools from the available literature that only a few guidelines could be used: the school would be geographically isolated so that easy access to other schools and communities could not be readily achieved by its members; it would offer secondary education only as far as Grade ten (about Form Five in New Zealand terms); it would not be located in a single-industry town; and, importantly for the researcher, would be within five hours drive from the coast.

Secondly, the problem of what identity to choose in the school for the purposes of research had to be decided. Should the researcher be a participant or a non-participant observer? As the research was being undertaken in a very small school, this was a crucial decision.

ISSUES IN UNDERTAKING NATURALISTIC RESEARCH IN AN ISOLATED NORTH QUEENSLAND SCHOOL.

A number of issues emerged as important in the conduct of this research: the physical environment dictated a large part of the study, and in fact, the researcher had to make many adjustments to it; the matter of high visibility as a stranger in the community had to be overcome, certain protocol had to be learnt, the differing expectations members of the community held for the research had to be accommodated; and finally, the question of ethics in such a situation could not be avoided.

(a) Physical Circumstances

The interior of North Queensland is by most standards hot, and for much of the year very dry. In summer its isolation from the more populous coastal area is heightened by widespread flooding. This information could be obtained from any library, but the significance of it was not fully realized until the research had begun. The problem of simply getting through a school day in the absence of air-conditioning was one that had to be somehow met. It in no small way accounted for the

seven pubs serving a community of less than 1800 people, and their patronage by, among others, the staff of the school. Heat played its part in the pattern of interaction in the school and out of school, and for early advice to the writer to "walk slowly like a North Queenslander and take your salt tablets".

The isolation of the community was of the most physical kind - simple geographic distance to any other centre of population, a contrast to, say, the closer pattern of settlement of rural Victoria, Tasmania or New Zealand. The importance of one's mode of transport was not to be underestimated. Fortunately the writer had a "ute" or pick-up truck provided by the University which fitted into the landscape ideally, but unfortunately the University's name and crest had been monogrammed on it, a matter that subsequently attracted unwelcome attention from other "ute" drivers. A feature of North Queensland drivers was their respect for other people's vehicles, in a very similar way to the respect of the cowboy for his horse. On locking my (the University's) "ute" on the main street early in my stay in the town, a passerby loudly enquired where I was from if I thought I had to lock my car - an unknown practice in the locality. Car theft was virtually unheard of - to steal a man's car was almost like taking away his legs. To fit in with the local custom I had to cease locking the University's vehicle. As a member of the community, especially during the weekends, new forms of entertainment were readily found - the rodeo and the races. Horses played a very large part in the conversation of pupils in the school, (together with cars), and it was necessary to learn a new language to participate.

In summary, to be able to fit into the local community it was essential to adapt to local conditions. Days spent in the school were frequently followed by evenings in the pub and weekends at the racetrack or rodeo, a not unpleasant way of "finding the subjects' perspectives in their non-theoretical lives".

(b) Visibility

Unfortunately the writer was a highly visible person in a small community. Not only did he travel in a vehicle labelled with a University crest, but began on what was a very public note, by flying

into the town with his supervisor - a well-known Professor, in the latter's private aeroplane.

This was to have been to meet the Principal of the school together with a few community leaders who were interested in education. The event was a unique one in the history of the community and was well publicised and well attended. Community leaders willingly gave their versions of rural educational disadvantages. A most important matter however, was made clear to the two visitors - not only was a researcher welcome to work in the local school and its community, but such work was regarded as potentially valuable as it would hopefully publicise country peoples' "problems". The well-publicised initial meeting was followed some time later by the commencement of fieldwork based in the school at which point the matter of high visibility became obvious. How to find a niche in the school without disturbing the day-to-day pattern was not going to be easy. To begin with, the only place to live was in the teachers' quarters, so that total immersion in the life of the school was difficult to avoid. Pupils, teachers, the Principal, the parents association, and even the Rotary Club were curious about the research and were keen to offer advice and to have their questions answered. The Isolated Childrens' Parents' Association (ICPA) even sent parents to help speed up the research process by acquainting the researcher with who was who in the district.

At least a month passed before the researcher's presence in classes, the staffroom, playground, pubs and shops ceased to attract attention. The constant question "what have you found out?" continued to be asked and was difficult to answer. Gradually however, as the researcher ceased to attract attention, the life of the community could be discussed in conversation rather than in the awkward terms of an outsider asking questions.

The major problem in being a highly visible outsider was in finding a suitable place in the school that did not appear to identify oneself with any particular group, especially teachers or pupils.

(c) Protocol

Before entering the school, the researcher had decided to act as a non-participant observer of all that happened. This changed in the first week when a teacher became ill and the Principal found a ready replacement in his observer from the University. It was essential to not appear as a teacher if pupils were to be observed, but it was difficult to have this point of view accepted without appearing to be avoiding work. Most pupils did not appear to mind the occasional change of teacher, especially when they could show a New Zealander how to catch snakes (in the school grounds) or play "Aussie rules" (football). Whether to spend time in the playground or the staffroom during recess ceased to be a problem as interest in one's presence declined. The major protocol issue however, was between the Principal and his staff, and the fear of many of the latter that information may be passed on by the researcher. It was necessary to ensure that the Principal knew where the researcher was in the school at any time of the day, but the matter of what transpired between him and the researcher appeared to be a question most teachers wanted to have answered. Maintaining confidentiality became a major aspect of the day-to-day conduct of the research.

(d) Expectations

While it was possible to become part of the school, and even the community, to the extent that the researcher ceased to be the subject of constant attention, a more latent and powerful influence could not be overlooked - viz. the expectations of many interest groups of the research.

While the matter of educational disadvantage as outlined by the Schools Commission was not revealed in any discussion in the community, virtually all groups assumed that the research was being undertaken to draw attention to problems as they saw them. These ranged from one group impressing upon the researcher the need to remove their children from the isolation of the community and place them in boarding schools in distant cities, others arguing for the need to have a full secondary school established so that children would have an opportunity to matriculate. Teachers at all levels informed the researcher of the very real (and obvious) difficulties they faced in their first or second year of professional practice by being placed in such a small and isolated school, while the local M.P. took yet another view.

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The matching of these expectations yielded a lot of information about the community but, like the matter of protocol between Principal and teachers, to be seen too much in the presence of one group was likely to be damaging to relations with another. Members of a particular interest group were often anxious for the researcher to contact other like-minded people in the community, so that networks of relations began to emerge, all focusing on the school and what it did or did not do for the community.

(e) Ethics

Naturalistic research often involves ethical matters. In this case questions of discipline caused as much division in the community as they did among the staff. Corporal punishment was frequently used and because of the unique place of the researcher, much could be seen and heard. The summary punishment of a dozen boys by the Principal one morning without other staff members' knowledge caused considerable discontent. One teacher was heard to complain "half the school gets caned and no-one knows why". Furthermore, the witnessing of what could only be described as illegal behaviour by pupils put the researcher in an awkward position at times with teachers, but non-intervention often paid off. Some illegal behaviour was actually for the researcher's benefit and one pupil was heard to voice his approval when he (the researcher) did not act as a teacher would in the circumstances.

PART II

BACKGROUND TO EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN URBAN CANADA

The extensive attention given to the subject of educational disadvantage from the early 1960s in the United States in particular spilled over into Canada. Early studies were launched, notably through the Canadian Welfare Council, and one nationwide survey directly relates the school learning problems to social welfare, in studying families on social assistance where both poverty and the absence of one parent are considered as factors. (Malik, 1966)

The children commonly called "disadvantaged" in Canada are the "one out of five" Canadians (Economic Council of Canada, 1968) who have too little of everything from economic resources, living conditions, personal attention, self-respect and self-confidence.

Quick, who edited the report by Canadian educators studying compensatory programmes for the disadvantaged, summed up the notion of disadvantage and related it to the question of educability when he said:

A child who is culturally* disadvantaged is usually one who has grown up in a home where social and economic conditions are sub-marginal. His parents, for the most part, lack motivation for self-improvement and material achievement and participate very little in the community at large. The deprived* child has not learned from his parents fundamental attitudes toward achievement and he has not developed significant attitudes for improvement. The lack of parental aspiration and the early deficit sensory training and expression, produce in the child, deficient language and perceptual development and little ability to think abstractly about the world around him. These deficiencies, although not synonymous with deficient intellectual ability are often interpreted as such. (Quick, 1964)

The concluding sentence by Quick is of course a vital one, as such deficiencies in performance by disadvantaged children were, and still are, often presented as evidence to support the notion that lower-class children are necessarily inferior in intelligence to middle and upper class children.

From even a brief perusal of the early literature it is clear that there existed an excessive preoccupation with children's families. The predominant focus of many of the studies has been with the social class background, the economic and occupational status of the parents, factors which are often deployed to the detriment of the children. This led Silberman (1970) in the United States to state:

This literature has contributed a great deal to our understanding of why 'disadvantaged' children fail; with a few exceptions, it has contributed very little to our understanding of why schools fail, or of how they might be changed in order to make learning successful for children from these backgrounds. Indeed, the question hardly even comes up in most scholarly literature.

Silberman went on to say:

It is taken for granted that if children fail to learn, the fault must lie with them rather than the school.

* Emphases mine: simply to show the early labels popularly used at that time.

Thus from the research literature we are left without any indication of how schooling affects such children, in a qualitative sense. There is no indication of how disadvantaged children perceive school and come to define their own identities as a result of their participation in school. Little attention was given to the institutionalized life of the children or, more specifically, the quality of the interaction between children, their teachers and other aspects of the school environment. The atmosphere and tone of the institution is set by the complex interaction of all the participants. In the classroom interaction, the teacher influences the children, not only by intentional behaviour and actions, but often without awareness of the behaviour and the effect of that behaviour upon the child.

The guiding assumption of this investigation was that learning in schools takes place in interaction with other people, and how children learn is partly dependent upon how they are taught, and how the school environment, the institutionalized beliefs, images and expectations are perceived by the learner. Investigators rarely take the perspective of this study and question what it is they are asking these children to fit into. It was felt necessary that it was time to hear from those intimately involved - the 'disadvantaged' children themselves. Consequently, naturalistic research techniques were felt to be appropriate to gain highly personal data.

ISSUES IN UNDERTAKING NATURALISTIC RESEARCH IN AN INNER-CITY SCHOOL IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Any in-depth, long-term study involves a number of issues, professional and personal, which have to be considered. Largely due to the primary interest in the topic of poverty and educational disadvantage, other research made to the subject, plus theoretical and field work considerations - and importantly not to underestimate personal preference - a school was selected in a sub-centre of the Greater Metropolitan area of Vancouver.

(a) Physical circumstances

The area served by the school in this study included a district in which many houses were in a state of disrepair. The area also contained the largest percentage of: families in the 20-44 age group; apartments

and flats; lodging families; households occupied less than 3 years; and men earning less than \$3000 per year. The area also had a high percentage of households with less than 2 years occupancy, thus the nature of transiency of the area was established. This transiency extended to the school. Thus even though the research focused on one school for intensive study, the investigation was with children who for the most part had attended several different schools. The study was not so much of a study of one school but rather an analysis of a diverse group of pupils, with heterogeneity of prior school contact and experience, who had come together as "accidental neighbours" by their attendance at this school. The second point of unity lay in the fact that many were singled out and characterized as being from low income family backgrounds, welfare families, or one-parent situations and labelled as 'deprived' by the school.

The school was identified by the school board as having special educational needs and was designated an "inner-city" school in order to appropriate additional finances and programmes at the school.

The Principal was particularly keen to have an in-depth study conducted at the school. He openly stated that many of the children present at the school at any one time did not seem to benefit from schooling and "what is needed is for someone to zero in on what creates a dislike of school and why they don't perform in class".

(b) Visibility

Ease of access to the school was favoured by initial conversations between a Professor of Educational Sociology at the University of British Columbia and the Principal of the school. The importance of University faculty members gaining and maintaining good relations with public schools was vividly illustrated in this context.

The problem of an "identity" which would or could be easily accepted by the children was overcome by concealing my identity as a University researcher by simply using the title of "writer", interested in learning about what children think about schools. It was felt that the use of the identity as a writer would not necessarily lead to an association with the administration of the school. The interest given by the children toward the idea of a story being written about

them and the school, without me having to explain further, would indicate the acceptance of this identity as non-threatening to them. Particular attention was also given to telling the children I spoke with that false names would be used in 'the story'.

After the first two weeks of the study I was never mistaken for a new teacher, or substitute teacher, nor a surrogate teacher - there were at the time five student teachers from the local University doing their teaching practice. In the role of observer there was a deliberate attempt to interact with the children and become familiar with them in order to record their responses towards their experiences of school; in this sense the observer is perhaps also a participant.

I deliberately established and maintained a high visibility with the children, whilst avoiding anything but minimal contact with the teachers. This I should add did nothing to relieve the anxiety that some teachers maintained towards the study. The Principal on the other hand saw the need for me to keep a high profile in front of the children and not to be identified with him or the school in general. On several occasions he said that if my going into his office created any difficulties for me, real or potential, then I should not feel embarrassed in staying away. My regular berth in the school became the library - a sort of neutral 'half-way' house, used by children for project work, generally supervised by the librarian, not the classroom teachers, and also a place for casual reading and board games. For me, the library proved a practical workplace, and incidentally apparently served to further confirm my adopted role as a writer of stories.

(c) Protocol

As has been stated already, the Principal was eager for the study to be conducted at his school, and his warm support proved vital throughout the six months of contact. It should be mentioned that although the teachers had mixed reaction to the study, all of them in practice offered full cooperation. It was quite probably the Principal's open support, and enthusiasm for the study, that the teachers felt they should, or must, allow me the considerable freedom and frequent impositions on their time, through time spent with the pupils.

(d) Expectations

Some of the teachers at the school thought they were being set up, since I did not reveal any of the ongoing data which I collected, neither did I appear to seek their opinions on the disadvantaged children. At the start of the study I did meet formally with all the teachers to explain my planned study, although at that time the original statement of the problem drawn up prior to fieldwork entry, was vague and implicit. The apparent lack of definitive research goals or themes for investigation did little to allay teaching fears. The primary goal of attempting to record the children's definition of the schooling process seemed to the teachers to be peculiarly subjective and biased - the teachers felt that they should have their say. It should be added that I did collect data from the teachers, unobtrusively, and their comments seemed to confirm the notion that they appeared to believe that being disadvantaged or 'deprived' was something children brought with them to school and that for the most part the school(s) cannot do very much to affect their status one way or another. If anything, the teachers expected me to concur with their definition of the situation, a few 'suspected' that my overt concentration on how the children perceive what goes on in school, and how they feel it affects them, necessarily aligned me with the children, and with a short inferential leap against the teachers. This latter view was not the deliberate case, although placing emphasis on the basic value orientation of how the children felt and perceived their school career and identity did not exclude comments on the teachers - but more collectively than as individuals.

(e) Ethics

In retrospect I think it may have been politically and ethically appropriate to discuss insights gained in the research environment with the teachers as my study progressed. Yet it would have been difficult and potentially a source of greater alienation between the researcher and the school staff to open up the unfolded data and perspective that evolved. The perspective that a child's behaviour and performance in school is not only influenced by the social class background and the socio-cultural environment in which the child lives but may be determined more by the school, would hardly be a comforting thought in the context of the inner-city school.

Increasingly it became a central conviction of the study that the way children "see" themselves is crucial to the ability to learn, and therefore to take advantage of the school's opportunities. In the worst of such circumstances, children may be suppressed or inhibited by the school context, by the relations or lack of them within the school. The influence of the school upon the children's self conception is great because it involves socialization to an obligatory and long-enduring role, namely that of pupils. The core of this naturalistic research was the search for the concerns of the children themselves and is quite different from examining the "real" world of the children with a preconceived set of hypotheses.

PART III

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many North Americans, not unlike their Australasian counterparts, had been unwilling to accept that their respective countries had a rigid class structure. In so much as the distinctions between social classes were not in fact so marked by clearly defined objective standards, and that the conventions of caste and legitimized inequality of status has supposedly never had the wide support found in the 'older' countries of Europe, the unwillingness can be appreciated.

Having said that, however, it did not dismiss the prevailing characteristics of the class division which did exist relating to inequalities of wealth, opportunities and social recognition. Thus the barriers of inequality are the vertical ones of a socio-economic hierarchy. The criteria of classes which were presented by Radford (1934) in his book Plain Ordinary Man are of significance here because to each social characteristic he posits, there is an economic parallel. The first characteristic is EXCLUSIVENESS and Radford says that the most 'socially disintegrating devices' are those employed in the political, legal and economic institutions. The occupational sector is an important area covered by this wide statement with but one example including the educational prerequisites which permit or deny entry to certain professions. The second characteristic relates to the feeling of DEPENDENCE, or INDEPENDENCE which members of various classes have.

Educational qualification and/or specific job attainments may provide the independence; the lack of them can lock people into forced dependency. Thirdly, a characteristic which is related but often overlooked, is that class differences are differences of FREEDOM. There is the freedom which comes about through culture or education in the widest sense, or again to use the work sector by way of illustration, the freedom which is effected by being able to exercise the choice as to the sort of way that one earns a living and the numerous repercussions which relate to this.

The interesting point about the three social criteria is that in addition to their being directly related to the basic economic position of the individual there is also a vital educational component to each of them. Indeed the discussion of social class and the delicate subject of inequality later led many forward-looking students of social science into the field of education. The influence of class level and income upon educational attainment had been presented by Furneaux (1961) in his pioneer study The Chosen Few 1948-58 in Great Britain, as well as notable studies written decades earlier, principally the "reservoir" studies by Hogben and the work of Lewis (1923) with one of the few early examples of studies of direct and qualitative character in his book Children of the Unskilled. However, more recently, almost without parallel, the relationship of income level and class position upon educability - the ability to take advantage of education, has received massive attention. Based upon the internationally repeated statistical fact that low socio-economic background is related to poor performance in school attainment, early age of school-leaving, and narrowed occupational choice a primary emphasis has been upon amelioration. As Girard (1954) in France had stated:

".... by raising the standard of living, and providing better facilities for the education of children of all classes, we would enable the talents of a greater number to be given their due measure of recognition."

Looking back, this was easier said than done. Talent searches and proposals for increasing the effectiveness of the educational system in fulfilling both the quantity and quality of schooling for low socio-economic group children became a dominant concern, with equal need and

justification in the 'new' as well as the 'old' world. Yet the issues involved in the etiology of low-income and the educational 'effects' appeared increasingly complex and no simple answer to overcoming them was to be found as the lid was taken off this Pandora's box.

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